

Fortnightly Sermon

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LOSSES

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LOSSES.

There are many millions of possible events, and many millions of persons on the earth. Yet of the possible events, perhaps there is not one that happens to only one person. We can not tell. But surely it is true that almost any one of the millions of events happens to many persons, and some of them to all persons. Now, in thinking what events there are which befall all persons, I have perceived two things: First, I see that they are very many, much larger in number than we might suppose at first, seeing that there are such countless millions of persons to divide among them the millions of events. Secondly, I see that these events which befall all persons include the greatest and most mighty events which befall any persons. That so many same events, and among these the greatest possible, befall us all, is one reason that we are all alike. That so many different events are sprinkled here and there and befall men in companies, communities, nations, or other natural assemblies, but are not common to all persons, is one reason that we are so unlike, yet with a common nature or resemblance pervading communities or assemblies.

Of the very great events, comprising the most mighty of all, which befall every one, four, I think, stand first, namely, 1. being born; 2. dying; 3. gaining some things; 4. losing some things. The two vast events of our coming hither and of our going away at last, stand up like mysterious barriers at the ends of life; between these we all gain some things, and some things lose. Thus loss is one of the events that surely befalls every one, and one of the most affecting and momentous too.

Losses are mingled with our lives like threads woven in and out. Three facts about them give them great interest in my mind, a peculiar part in our experience. One is that they are

the inseparable shadows of gains and pleasures; for we can gain some things only by loss of other things. Another fact is that we ourselves, if any one love us or benefit by us, must be a loss at some time, when we take our mysterious flight away. The other fact is that losses are often great sorrows, noble and divine sorrows; so that the theme of losses takes hold on deep things in us, and is a tender, dear and sacred subject.

It is wise to bethink us how sure it is that losses will befall. For either things fly away from us, or we from them. Time drops but briefly his jewels of hours and days; "it is soon cut off and we fly away." Riches "take to themselves wings," or, if they stay to the end, 'tis but because we take wings first ourselves. Friends fall like leaves. Intimacies cease, broken violently (an unhallowed bitterness), or fading gradually (a mournful frustration). Comrades forsake us, or go to other places, or die. Nay, if we keep our beloved, in body, 'tis to lose one form of them after another which the heart has cherished. The little babe in the arms is precious; but every day there is a small loss of him. Soon the daily detachments from our baby-jewel, like grindings from a diamond, have changed the shape. The infant is lost. We have the playful child, full of motion, of words, of questions, games, wiles, whimsseys, ruses, craft, quickness, fascination; but the bosom-babe is gone. Still go on the polishings and cuttings of time, and soon the winsome child is gone—another loss. What is the gain? A youth, strong, liberated, flaming, glorious, proud, princely, daring, contentious! But the tricksy child is lost. Soon the fiery youth follows him into that mist of dispossession; only a trained, sober man is by your side.

These are the losses inevitable. But others, that wring the heart hard, fall by the way as mystically as rain or meteors. The child, all light, the youth, all flame, the man, all sober glow, suddenly vanish. Cool Death loves them, and abducts them. His office is to lead away the old; but he is let loose often to seize the young too, the beautiful, the gay, the sweet, the gentle, lilyed with childhood or rosemaried with youth. 'Tis his office, too, to cover up the spent or useless; but often he carries off jealously bodies full of service, minds full of counsel, hearts dispensing love as useful as dew, the wise father, the precious

and graceful mother. Ah! in these transfers comes loss indeed! Then comes heart-anguish! Then bitter struggles, mayhap a long time doubting and rebellious! Then holy sorrows, sacred bereavements, tears and prayers! Then long loneliness and out-reachings of the heart that come back like empty hands, without the precious child, without the sweet mother or the heart-dwelling friend!

So losses come, and must come. On whatever plane of life we live, they must come. If we live in ambition, which is "like hunger, obeying no law but its appetite," and "not always wise because 'tis brave,"—who gains all that he soars after? Nay, how many, after the soaring, drop with nothing? If we live in riches, how little they can buy, how easily are lost, what poor pleasures by the use of them, what hopeless chagrins by the flight of them! If we live not for ourselves in ambition or riches, but for others in love, then what noble sorrows replace the rank pangs of discontent, what tender and precious bereavements commute the torments of defeats and wrecks. As losses thus mingle in life, like a woof in the warp, this sermon is to express three thoughts about losses which, as I hope, will hold both strength and comfort in them.

But I shall speak wholly of the great losses of life, losses which are noble and heavenly sorrows. For of the lower losses, one thought is enough to give all possible strength and comfort in them, one principle holds the whole secret of them. Which one thought and principle is that we ought not to esteem much these lower things, and thereupon we shall rise easily above losses of them. To be concrete, and plain by example, I will put it thus—That the one principle of support under loss of riches, or power, or position, or whatsoever on that plane, is that we ought not to be devoted to these things; but we ought to be devoted to thoughts and to persons. Therefore it is in these realms alone, where thoughts and persons inhabit, that great and affecting losses ought to be possible to us. So that touching such losses alone we need to seek strength and comfort. For if we lose riches, our strength is that we ought not to be so devoted to them as to suffer much. But if we lose what it is a very joy and holiness and glory of life to be devoted unto, then, indeed, we need a strength and

comfort from large thoughts which, as it were, may dissolve, in one divinity, in one beauty and law, our devotion and the object of our devotion, so as to show us our love and our loss together in one divine keeping, mercy, love and law. Now as I have said, the objects to which we may be devoted with all our heart and soul, whereby loss in these things is a deep and holy sorrow, are thoughts and persons. But thoughts can not be lost. They are of that divine essence that they can not retire from us. Naught can abstract or abduct them from us, or take away their dwelling-place with us. Therefore I have no losses of which to speak now but losses of persons. Such losses may be by death. These are the easiest of them. No way is so little sorrowful as death by which to lose beloved persons. Or such losses may be by slow alienation, unworthiness of heart, unfaithfulness, treachery; or by moral disappointment, wrecks of character, unveiling of wickedness, overthrows, undoings, sinkings, foundering in dark seas. Whether a person turn from us treacherously—showing that he loved only with easy syllables or in summer weather, nay, loved not, but kept a careful ledger for himself—or whether (ah terrible!) we find we have loved a plague, poison, corruption, well hidden in fine linen,—these are the racking, rending, dreadful losses, these the tearings of persons from us which tear out the heart of us. Weighed with these, the death of dear persons makes but a light loss, yea, it rests in the scale-pan like a crown cut from night, set all around with brilliants of starry hopes.

But loss by death is sorrowful. 'Tis the nature of love that so it should be, and must be. How the heart clings! What a wrench the parting is! How exceeding precious is the daily presence of children, of sweet wife and mother, counseling father beloved friends! Nay, how dear the knowledge that they are on this earth, and though ten thousand miles away, how near they are! When that solemn, misty robe is brought to them and unseen hands wrap it around them and carry them away, and vanish with them like the day in the west, the heart is bowed down with a heavy weight of pure and solemn sorrow. It is of these losses only that now I will speak; for the worse losses, the bitter and and racking desertions and ruins of persons by which we loose them, require other thoughts, other "medicines

for the soul." Of the losses by death I will offer now the three thoughts which will have grace of strength and comfort in them, as I hope.

The first thought is this: Touching all losses, things go; but first they *come!* Fasten the mind on that. They could not go, but that first they come. We can not lose, but that already we have had. Beloved persons go from us; but first they have come to us. They come in every way just as they have gone, as solemnly, mysteriously, and in the same degree; so that never our loss is greater, nor can be, no, not by the weight of a breath, than the gain and joy that first we have had. We see them go in mystery. We can not follow. Our eyes are too blind with tears, even if the way were more open. But if our orbs were dry and clear, still we could not follow. But this mystery is no greater than the coming was. We can not follow the birth or the death behind the veils which hang over them. So that our loss of sweet children by the death of them is no more solemnized by holy mystery than our gain by the birth of them, and no less glorified. If a long time, many precious years, we keep them, or they keep their sweet mother, their dear father, that is but to say that much is possessed; and if then there be a flying away, and the loss be bitter and wring hard, 'tis only because we have had so much, so very much, such precious store. Surely we may turn our eyes from the loss to rate again the gain that was before the loss. Surely it is but grateful and truthful to bethink us that what has gone we first had, and that just by so much as the loss is a great sorrow, the having was a long and lovely joy. Surely this is wise and truthful and simple, good piety—a source of good strength and comfort for us. For it will make great difference to us whether we tent our souls in the dark and narrow pass of our present loss, or in the wide sun of the plain of our long and blissful having. Therefore turn the mind from our losing to our having had. 'Tis piety and help to do so. Saith a poet, "Some men, what losses soever they have, they make them greater; and if they have none, even all that is not gotten is a loss." I will show the difference between looking on one side and on another by a good allegory which I have heard. Two pitchers were carried to a fountain to be filled. One said, "I am weary of this life of mine; how-

ever often I go away from the fountain filled, I always come back empty." "Why, how you look at it," said the other; "for my part I was thinking that however often I come empty to the fountain, I always go away filled." Saith another poet, "He is poor that has not lost." And truly so; for to loose nothing is fair proof of little to lose; small losses mean small gains. But says the poet, also, "He is poorer that hath lost and forgotten." Truly so again, and wisely said, with a knowledge of the human heart. For if one *forget* what he has lost, 'tis because he was so little rich in the enjoyment of it that it is as if he had it not, and though having it he was poor with it. But the poet continues, "He is poorest who has lost, and wishes he might forget." Again wise and true; for if one have been very rich in the enjoyment of a beloved person, he will not wish to pluck that person from his mind because he hath fled from his side; no, but he will dwell on him with piety and a kind of glory. Therefore I say it is a good thought, with strength and comfort in it, that if things go, first they come, and that if we lose beloved persons, first they came to us, and stayed with us a long, blissful time, by as much as the parting is sorrowful; and that we should fasten the mind on this thought. Once a maiden asked me to marry her to her lover who was very ill. I questioned her long and deeply, and warned her. "Have you considered," said I, "that probably soon you will be left a widow? and all which that means?" "Yes," she answered; "but if the worst come at last, or come soon, or now, still it is such solemn joy to have had, and to remember!"

The second thought is that as all things go, but first they come, so they come perfectly, completely; they are *all* ours. But they go away only partially, and only in a small measure cease to be ours. Fasten the mind on that.

Purposely do I say "things" and not persons. For it is true even of things that they come to us perfectly and can be withdrawn only in part. If we have riches, they are ours, wholly. What may we not do that riches can do? We may build, plant, gather beautiful things, make centers of power and instruction, rear institutions, spread waves of happiness, refreshment, knowledge, rest, health. Do the riches fly away thereafter? Perhaps. But the things we have done with them

can not fly. The good fruits in our own mind, the buildings on earth or in heaven, the joys provided for others, the thrills or blessings we have set up in a heart—these wither not, these stay. The riches come perfectly to us, with all their power; but they can go away only imperfectly, leaving much power with us in immortal forms. But much more so is it with beloved persons. How completely they come to us! How perfectly they are ours—all ours! They touch us on all sides. They belong to us in every power of our being and work in us in every manner. To our hearts they come with perfection, to our love with wholeness. Without hindrance we wrap them in our love and cover them with it. They call forth our tenderest feelings. They break up the very fountains of the heart that it may stream over them. And they give us of their love in like measure. They unite with us in mind, they join in thoughts with us, they share the splendors of intelligence, glory with us in ideals, are thrilled with the beauties which illuminate us; they tremble with the harmonies which shake us. They are ours in soul; they know with us what religion is; they love the truth with us, sing praises with us, inspire, hope, worship, pray. In all, they come to us *perfectly*. There is no limit to our drawing unto each other in earnest life. Power to power, love to love, thought to thought, they may watch with us and walk with us. With such perfection they come to us, in such heavenly manner they are ours!

But how go they away? Only a little. When the loss of them comes, how lose we what perfectly we have had? Only in part; yea, in very little part. Of all the things which they brought with them, of all in which they were ours so perfectly, in such spherical glory, as the heavens are round about the earth on all sides, of all this union and blessedness, the loss of them by death can take away but one part, which is the perceptiveness of them by our senses. We can not see or touch or hear them any more. Some strange law, which yet we know not, cuts off so much as that. But that is all. Every other dear delight which they had with us, and were unto us, is fixed in us and immortal. They came *perfectly*, and perfectly they *stay* with us, except only with our senses. All the precious possession of them in thought and love, all the trust in their faithful

affection, the associations which they created in our minds, the memories, the intelligence, the pure joys of high devotions unto each other and together unto good things—these remain untouched. Not one throb or song or prayer of them all can the loss by death tear away. Memory hath charge of them. How rich a thought is this for us—That unto every power and possibility in our souls our beloved persons come; but they can be taken away by death from no more than our senses! Surely what joy! What strength! What comfort! Fasten the mind on that.

The third thought is that as things go away, but first they come, and as they come perfectly, completely, but go away only in part, so some things are dearer to us than others. But what things? Those that most belong to the mind, heart, soul—such as beloved persons. These being the dearest, therefore to part with them is the most painful of partings. But it is just they that leave most of their associations and of themselves with us when they go away, and part with us the least. Therefore, it is ordered very mercifully in the Providence and Law of losses, that we lose least those dearest blessings which cause most pain in the loss of them. Those most precious treasures, which by leaving us pierce us with the sharpest sorrow, are those which leave us the least. Fasten the mind on that.

So careful are all things to depart from us in less degree than they come to us, so is it written in the divine nature of things that all things come to us completely after their kind, but go away from us only partially, endowing us with themselves in full measure, but being lost by us only in some measure—so rich and wide is this law that even the lower orders of treasures obey it, as I have said. Riches come completely, and all the power and grace of them is in our hands while they stay; and if they take wings, still they leave with us always the sweetness of what grace and joy we have builded with them. But riches fly away more completely than persons, who are dearer than riches; if they go they leave less with us. For we but use riches; they can not use us. We but plan and do and execute with them. Wealth is a lowly instrument. We can not commune with it; 'tis a servant, not a friend; a thing, not a soul. We stand with it in our hands, but lay it not to our hearts. It talks

not, loves not, sings not, nor studies, walks, counsels, prays with us. But when a beloved person is taken from us, all these things remain with us. He has conversed with us, he has mixed his very life with our very life, he has loved us and advised us, we have toiled together, and together hoped, feared, rejoiced, triumphed; he has become reason in our reason, his image is in the soul's eye, he has wept and laughed with us, grieved and danced, bowed down with us and been lifted up—our prayers have been one. When he is taken away, in how little part is he taken, being removed only from the senses, while all these joys and parts of him stay with us immortally. By as much as he is more precious than gold, by so much the less he can be taken from us. He is dearest of all things to us, and least of them all he can leave us. "Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?" No sting, no victory! Only a precious, holy, heavenly sorrow, only a hunger of heart for the dear body or presence of the beloved person, because, in truth, he feeds the soul so much by all of him that remains that the heart hath the strength and health to be hungry.

I leave these three thoughts with you touching losses:

1. That 'tis true we lose precious things, but first we have them; they go, but first they come. Fasten the mind on that.
2. That our treasures come to us perfectly, and are *all* our's; but they go away only in part, and leave great measures of themselves with us. Hence, we have total gifts, but we can not have total losses. Fasten the mind on that.
3. That the dearer our treasures are, which is to say, beloved persons, and those nearest to heart and soul, the less can they be taken away from us, and the more of themselves they leave with us. Therefore, our most precious gains and treasures, though the sorrow for the loss of them be great and divine, yet in the loss of them are less loss by the very measure of their preciousness and nearness, because they go away in the least part and leave most of themselves with us. Fasten the mind on that.

When we look at the laws of having and losing, and the mysteries in us, we feel borne in a vast and deep sea, even the life of God in us. I have heard of voyagers on the ocean, who, on that mighty heaving breast and rolling majesty, where the winds

have free course, the waters rise, the vast waves yawn, and they that go down in ships are swayed as tree-tops in the blasts—have felt all peaceful and quiet, awed, quelled, but calm and even lulled, lying down to slumber as “rocked in the cradle of the deep.” So may we be, on the breast of these thoughts of our losses, which is the law and nature of God. So may we live, awed and quelled, but calm, blest, till we too become a loss in our turn—yet not so much a loss as first and forever a gain to our beloved—and borne on these depths of faith and of knowledge, we lie down, and after us they, and are not afraid, “rocked in the cradle of the deep.”